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women



Center
of
Attention

CENTER OF ATTENTION

Family Services program offers hope for teenage mothers, others

TO DONATE OR VOLUNTEER

The Therapeutic Child Center at Family Services of Greater Waterbury is accepting donations of gently used toys and clothes, markers and money for its programs and the children it serves. The center also welcomes volunteers, especially those who have backgrounds in early childhood development.

For details, contact Nancy Winslow at (203) 591-2387.

BY BRYNN MANDEL
REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

Jarilyn Rivera spent much of her young life in and out of foster care and state custody. At age 15, after one of several flights that had her essentially living on the streets, she discovered she was pregnant.

Rivera resolved that her baby would not endure a life like hers. But when her son, Nyzaiah Williams, was born three-and-a-half years ago, Rivera struggled. They lived in a state Department of Children and Families facility for teen mothers. Having bounced from place to place herself, Rivera had no model for mothering. To boot, her son was fitful and nonverbal, prompting a label as possibly autistic.

While in the residential program for teen mothers, Rivera realized raising a child in

such an atmosphere was not working for her. The boy's father was not in the picture. She left the facility, hoping to find a job and her own home. That meant giving Nyzaiah to the very agency — DCF — that had loomed large in her own short life. Today, at 19, she agonizes over young Nyzaiah's thoughts about time away from her, but tells herself it was the best she could do then.

"I felt like I was stuck in a corner with this child that I knew I could not help," she said, explaining she intended her son's DCF placement to be temporary from the outset. "It got to the point where I just cried with him."

She recently regained custody of her son on weekends. The Therapeutic Child Center, run by the nonprofit Family Services of Greater Waterbury, now counts Rivera and her son as one of its successes. With bright-

ly colored rooms filled with the gurgling and giggling of youngsters, the center looks like any other day care. But all of the 40 to 45 children who attend the center have DCF involved in their lives for reasons ranging from homelessness to teen mothers to parents with substance abuse or behavioral problems.

The children range in age from 6 weeks old to 5; some live at home with parents, some in shelters and others in foster or group homes. The children come two, three or four days a week, but typically not for longer than DCF remains involved in their lives. The center aims to get the parent's and child's lives on track, then sends them on with strategies to face what life throws at them. In many cases, parenting coaching or help with housing, food stamps or other

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Jarilyn Rivera and her son, Nyzaiah Williams, 3, play in the preschool at Family Services of Greater Waterbury in Waterbury. Family Services offers a Therapeutic Child Center for children 6 weeks to 5 years old that provides a school readiness preschool for children who have DCF involvement in their lives.

CENTER: Family services gives direction to parent and child

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services are dispensed while the children attend the center.

In addition to day care hallmarks like finger painting and snack time, the youngsters here are observed by social workers who devise personal plans to address each child's needs.

After Rivera relinquished her son to DCF, she moved to Waterbury to try to find work. Nyzaiah, in foster care, enrolled in the Therapeutic Child Center when he was about 2. Initially, the staff found him nonverbal. He would rock back and forth and shake and avoid eye contact, recalled center director Nancy Winslow. But the staff did not believe he was autistic. They attributed his withdrawal and aversion to touch to having lived in an early foster home with many children and minimal individual attention. Winslow worked with DCF for a new foster placement, while Rivera started visiting the center to watch how teachers and social workers redirected Nyzaiah's agitated behavior.

"He's done a lot better. It's a big difference... He would scream, yell, throw himself on the floor, bite, hit," said Rivera, a slight woman who barely looks her 19 years. "Before, he didn't acknowledge me. Now, it's a different ball game."

Today, Nyzaiah tests at normal levels for his age, with the exception of his speech skills, which are slightly behind because he started verbalizing late, said Winslow.

Like Nyzaiah, most of the center's children have suffered some kind of trauma.

"This is a typical story for the kind of work we do," said Winslow, whose center recently embarked on an ambitious plan



STEVEN VALENTI/REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

Volunteer Andrea Reinhardt works with preschoolers at Family Services of Greater Waterbury in Waterbury.

to gain a rigorous accreditation. "We don't exclude (children) because of behavioral problems. We embrace these children and give them the tools they need to be successful."

When children have "melt-

downs," teachers and social workers teach them how to express themselves appropriately. They might take an unruly child to a quiet corner where pictures of faces emoting different ways are labeled with

words like "angry" or "worried" and ask them to point — to articulate rather than launch into a tantrum. In a room with six children between 16 months and 2 years old, youngsters dipped spoons in bowls of fruit, part of efforts to teach simple but important skills like how to feed themselves or sit at a table together. Routines and schedules are given paramount importance and depicted in illustrations where children can see them.

"A lot of what children need is predictability," said Winslow, standing in a room with several play stations.

Nearby, Nyzaiah clutched a toy dinosaur.

"Yeaahhhh," he said, playfully making the dinosaur fly through the air with Rivera at his side.

Once a week, children engage in play therapy with the clinicians. The center and the teachers interact with the children in ways tailored to the needs of each — from emotional, social, educational, physical and even monetary.

The center accepts donations, sending bags of used clothes and toys home with many charges. They serve nutritious meals and have even occasionally bathed children.

"A lot of these children don't

have excess, let alone things..." Winslow said, her voice trailing off as she watched a 3-month-old who dwarfed another, much older child. "I worry about the holidays. I worry about these kids not having anything. These children need support and love and these families need our help. It's not the child's fault. A lot of times, it's not even the parent's fault."

Rivera, who works second shift as a factory machine operator, also frets over what her son thinks when he is not with her.

"I'm a worrier. I like to think of future things," she said, pressing a delicate hand to her forehead and rattling off tasks including finding the right person to watch her son while she's working after she regains full custody, hopefully in a few weeks. "I just feel like I have a lot to do in a little bit of time. It's still stressful."

With almond-shaped brown eyes fixed on Winslow, Rivera told the woman neither she nor her son would have progressed as far in such a short time were it not for the Family Services program.

"I was mad at my mother for a long time. I don't want that for my son," she said, adding she constantly reassures him that "Mommy loves you."